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ABSTRACT

What is television doing to our society and our culture? What has it done to education? Television has had a great impact on human behavior but rather than communicating, it dictates a philosophy of life, moral judgments and a lifestyle. Television presents a violent image of society where fantasy and reality are often confused. It is a system controlled by only a few, yet the impact of their decisions reaches millions. The most important component, the viewer, is the least heard and the most unrecognized. A constant diet of television affects the cognitive process by eliminating creativity. Commercials preach a philosophy totally unrelated to realistic aspirations. Television has contributed to illiteracy by eliminating critical analysis and original thought. It creates and perpetuates stereotypes. Television news has become a visual newspaper but without the depth necessary for a comprehensive understanding of current events. The general public and especially parents have to become aware of the dangers of television. Most important, educators need to demand intelligent programming from the Federal Communications Commission and the stations themselves. Educators must also learn to compete successfully with television in the schools. (VT)

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TELEVISION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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TELEVISION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

AN ADDRESS PRESENTED TO THE NATIONAL TEACHER CORPS CONFERENCE
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Trying to avoid the products of mass media communication is like trying to avoid daylight. All people, regardless of who they are or where they are, are affected by the electronic media. For the educational community in particular, the effects of television on human behavior are of great concern.

> By the time the average American child has graduated from high school, he or she will have watched 15,000 hours of television, while having been exposed to only 11,000 hours of formal classroom instruction. That same child will have witnessed 18,000 murders.*

At a National Association of Broadcasters meeting in 1974, Senator Hubert Humphrey noted that if the average 23-minute television newscast was typed out, it would not cover even the front page of the New York Times.

What is television doing to our society and our culture? What has it done to education?

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*Dr. Michael Rotherberg, Journal of the American Medical Association.

To begin, it is essential for me to define the role of the media as I perceive it. Strictly speaking, a medium is a channel or a form of communication. But the term "medium" is often used to mean both the channel and the source, and sometimes it even includes the message. In short, the "medium" includes everything that reaches the audience. Therefore when one speaks of the "mass media", for example, one usually means not only the channels of mass communication, but also the content of those channels and the behavior of the people who work for them.

It is important to understand that the media, and particularly television, are a most significant invention. Their effect on human behavior equals the impact of man's creation of the wheel. Television is a socializer. It presents role models to children, influences opinions, forms attitudes, and molds minds. Even the votes that are cast for candidates are influenced by television. The very tilt of the camera and the angle of the picture can alter our perspective. The effects of television range from the trivial to the extremely significant.

Television is not mere entertainment. Syndicated newspaper columnist, Jack Mabley, has stated that television is "public enemy number one" in America. The younger the viewer, the greater is the danger.

Most people think television is communication, but it is not communication at all. Can you talk back to television? Can you communicate to it as it did to you? Obviously not. So, what is television? More than anything else, it is dictation; dictation that might give you information, but that a very elitest group of people control; dictation that presents you with a philosophy of life, moral judgments, and a lifestyle; dictation that will tell you what to think and who to think about. It is a drug for the mind, teaching you ultimately not to think for yourself.

The messages transmitted through the medium of television are subtle, yet most effective. Most people realize neither the subtleness nor the effectiveness. Often, it is not what is said but what is left unsaid that communicates the most. A recent example is the television movie "Someone I Touched" which dealt with venereal disease. It depicted a typical suburban couple in their mid-thirties as having contracted the disease. The plot of the movied centered on who gave who venereal disease. The stereotypes and myths of V.D. victims were effectively counteracted by the portrayal of the couple as "typical Americans." They were career oriented and the woman had not yet had a child. However, she was pregnant with her first child and the disease threatened the baby's health. Implicit in the movie was the fact that both husband and wife were involved in extramarital affairs. No one in the television movie, however, ever questioned whose baby the woman was

carrying. The extramarital sexual activity was therefore silently sanctioned as it was never questioned. Two messages were transmitted : the viewer was explicitly shown that venereal disease is not a disease of the young or the poor while at the same time he was silently told that extramarital sexual activity was acceptable. In reality, monogamous marriage was under question--a subtle, yet most effective message.

A broader example of television's effectiveness is violence in the visual media. It is hardly surprising that crime rates are very high. Citizens pay money to be entertained by violence, they watch it in their homes on television, and then they are shocked by criminal violence when it really happens. In many cases, the criminal is simply reacting to the content of his entertainment. The question that society ought to be shocked by concerns "Is the reality becoming the fantasy or is the fantasy becoming the reality?" It is often hard to distinguish which is which. And what are the effects of so much violence? Life becomes cheap, one becomes immune to murder, and guns become symbols for little boys eyeing manhood.

The danger of the media lies in the control of the media. Who controls the information? . . . Who controls what is seen and what is not seen? . . . Who controls how we see it? . . . Who edits the film? . . . Who decides the time of

the broadcast? . . . Who controls the message? . . . Who controls the perception? . . . Who controls the image? . . . Who controls the mind? . . . Who gives the interpretation and analysis? . . .Who decides what sujects are covered and which subjects are not? . . . Who defines what qualifies as news?

The fault with a system such as television is that it is controlled by only a few people, yet the impact of their decisions reaches millions. It is an elitist system with people at the top always winning and people at the bottom constantly losing. It is hard to accept that a few decision makers can determine so much for so many.

Communication must be a dual process for it to be productive. It involves feed-back as well as feed-in, output as well as input. If there is just feed-i and no feed-back, the transmission becomes dictation instead of communication. It becomes dictatorial because only one viewpoint is being expressed or even considered for expression. There must be a relationship between the viewer and the viewee. One is not successful without the other. It is easy to forget that the single most important individual in the media is the viewer. Yet he is the least heard and the most unrecognized. How does the viewer communicate? How does he speak to the communicator about what is being communicated? How does the mother who is tired of the violence on television request that her child be able to watch an educational program on a commercial station?

It is important to examine exactly what television does to human behavior. First, medical reports state that television stimulates aggressive behavior, particularly in children. Moreover, it produces this aggressive behavior coupled with a passive mind. A constant diet of television affects the cognitive process. Television is virtually void of thought. Watching television eliminates the creative process entirely. Television does not allow the viewer to participate--it only transports him to another environment which is totally created and controlled by someone other than himself.

Secondly, the electronic media preach a philosophy which is best expressed in commercials. All you have to do to have "sex appeal" is to use a certain toothpaste--what is a sexy tooth? You can find "real adventure" by drinking a certain beer--television just defined adventure. Regardless of how dirty the clothes or the floor, the commercial housewife is dressed in designer fashions while she marvels at the wonders of the product. The reality is that women who are scrubbing floors and washing clothes do not do it dressed in the height of fashion, not even in the best of families. Television just sold a falsehood, in spite of reality, that does much to dampen one's perspective. Similarly, commercials advocating cures for sluggishness, constipation, and fatigue show women taking Geritol or Ex-Lax as though they were remedies adding romance to their lives. Again, a phoniness is projected as

reality. Remember that a long commercial is 30 seconds and is written for a five year old's comprehension. This format, however, fits the philosophy of commercials : "Life is very simple. To be sexy (adventurous, well dressed, romantic, etc.), all you have to do is buy this product. This product will transform your life."

Thirdly, television has become society's new book. It is the alluded intellect and the electronic brain. Across the country, studies reveal that high school graduates cannot read, even to perform simple tasks like reading directions, filling out job applications, or reading a recipe. A society of functional illiterates and non-thinkers is being produced. Why? With television, one does not have to think. Television tells you what to think and keeps you current. People can allude to an intelligence that requires no reading or thinking.

An analysis of the dynamics of the thinking process indicate that one learns to think on four levels.

A. Information is <u>received</u>. You receive a body of knowledge, like learning the alphabet.

B. This information is <u>assembled</u>. You learn the sounds of letters, mix letters, and form words. You write words and sentences and communicate thoughts.

C. This information is <u>analyzed</u>. The mind becomes critical as it digests data. An organized logic begins to form.

D. Finally, <u>original thought</u> begins. The mind functions at the highest level of thinking. You write your own book rather than reading one.

Television totally eliminates the last two stages of thinking. Ninety percent of the time it gives you information it wants you to receive and in its minute editorials and commentaries (the remaining ten percent) it gives you information to be assembled. In a minute or perhaps 90 seconds, the viewer receives an instant analysis or is asked provocative questions about society's most serious problems. Sixty seconds is not enough time to even pose the problem, much less to analyze and to give a solution. The final effect is that complicated problems seem to be solved in a short time. Translated into human behavior, this type of thinking produces very high levels of frustration and low concentration spans among people who are heavy viewers of television.

The fourth thing television does is to create and perpetuate stereotypes. Television provides three primary images : the woman, the man, and the minority. These images prevail in nearly all television shows and are constant whenever they appear.

The typical television female is a housewife, but occasionally she may be an office wife. She is under forty. Her life is dedicated to the service of others. She is usually silly, problem-oriented, and dependent on the support of a man. If she works, she is usually in a non-professional job. If she does have a career, a careful character examination will reveal that the scene has only been changed from home to work.

Television females are very concerned with their attractiveness and are constantly occupied with the men in their lives. Regardless of her social status, this woman is dressed in the height of fashion and lives in relative comfort, if not in luxury. Her most serious problems concern having a baby, having an affair, or the activity of her children and/or husband. She is usually not a person in her own right but only instrumental to the lives of others.

The typical television male presents an opposite image. He is probably a law enforcer : a policeman, a detective, or a lawyer. He is authoritative and powerful. He is always in command and usually is the hero. This man is a problem solver and he usually is over 35 years old. His personality is distinctive and has a unique trait : Kojak's sucker, Baretta's bird, Columbo's raincoat, Starksy and Hutch's car. He is always viewed in action and away from home. He talks about his family, but they are seldom seem. He is aggressive and beats the odds, welcomes challenges, and most importantly, he always wins.

The minority image presents a still different picture. It takes television's white male and female images and gives them to the opposite sex. In other words, the characteristics of the white male are played by the Black woman while the white woman becomes the Black male. A television show about minorities, be they Black or Spanish, is always concerned with finan-

cial matters and social struggles. The characters are delighted with their poverty. Life's heartaches are glamorized and glorified in minority shows; the show "Good Times" is set in Cabrini Green, a Chicago housing project that is in one of the most depressed poverty areas in the nation. The characters in minority shows are in constant pursuit of bettering their social status by falsely imitating the ways of the middle class or the rich. Even when money is not a problem, it is the focus of the show. George Jefferson's conversation, for example, persistently concerns his climb on the social ladder. The Black male, even though he might be successful in the working world, is always seen at home rather than at work. Work for the minority man on television is more of a joke than a reality. Work is discussed, but not viewed--just the opposite of the portrayal of the white male where family is discussed, but not viewed.

The minority wife or mother or main female character is the aggressor and the decision maker. It is interesting to note that minority shows are depicted in a family setting. Few people ask "Where is Kojack's mother?". The minority male, however, is not an independent person. He is usually silly, ignorant, the brunt of the humor, and presents a generally hopeless, helpless type of character. In short, it appears that George Jefferson in 1977 is a reincarnated Amos and Andy of the 1940's. His name, address, and social status has

changed, but his image has not. He is still the buffoon, depending on his mother and/or wife to define his manhood.

What do these images communicate? Basically, they reinforce stereotypes. Women are incomplete human beings. Blacks are lazy and do not work; their life goal is to have a good time. Spanish people steal. Orientals are not discussed. The Indians are still losing the war. And white men rule on.

The final thing television does is to distort reality through its coverage of current events. The newscast is the most interesting television show of them all. Who decides what is news and how are these decisions made? In large part, these decisions are based on subjective opinion rather than objective analysis. Put very simply, it is the news director who decides what is seen, who is seen, and when it is seen. These decisions are often based on his own particular taste or perhaps are influenced by the latest consulting firm. The danger of the program director and the news director is that ultimately, what becomes news and/or what is included on a television program is based on one man's taste. One man's taste may be as good as another's, but what is questionable is the impact of his decision on the mainstream of society. The taster is limited by his appetite. There are almost no black program directors or news directors. There are no women program directors or news directors. If, for example, there was an Indian program director, the image of Indians would be portrayed much

differently than that of a savage beast.

The average news story is a minute and 10 seconds. A commercial ranges from 15 seconds to one minute. More often than not, the news stories and the commercial messages are the same length. How much depth and now much information can the viewer receive in a minute? At best, the audience is only receiving news flashes. Actually, more time is devoted to sports and weather categorically than to actual news events. Ron Powers writes in his book The News Casters that the news business is show business' voice of information.

Who presents the news is as important as the news content. News people often react to a situation rather than thinking about the situation they are reacting to. The depth of the news and the association of the newsmen must be questioned when the reporting of death or tragedy is done with a smile on the face. This distorts the tragedy of the reality. Very little research and analysis can go into a story that is discovered at two o'clock in the afternoon and needed by five o'clock in the evening. Perhaps at this point, television becomes its own victim. It seems that the television news writers often read the newspapers and then report the news. In this way, television news becomes a type of visual newspaper, minus the depth. The point is that the media of newspaper and television are different and that their perspectives on news coverage need to differ accordingly. The

spoken word differs from the written word and consequently, television and newspapers project different images and influence different behaviors. The government writes the laws of the land and broadcasters reflect the reality of our existence. Broadcasters need to be more responsible to their viewers.

The newscaster is America's authority symbol. On a national ABC newscast, chosen at random, there were 11 people reporting the news; 10 were men and one was a woman. All were middle aged and all were white. They reported 17 different stories and there were 12 different commercials. No single story was longer than 90 seconds. On the same day, Chicago local news reported 33 different stories with 25 different commercials. There were 11 reporters; two were anchorpersons, one man and one woman. Of the other nine reporters, eight were men and one was a woman. All were white with the exception of two blacks. The men were middle aged and the women appeared to be in their twenties. The transmitted message is that middle age white men speak with authority.

To point out the shallowness of news reports and the dynamics of television cognition, I developed a news exercise. The task was to watch television and record the subject and the length of each news story. During the same newscast, the viewer was to record the number of commercials and the type of product advertised. All information was recorded with a check mark on a prepared answer sheet. Put simply, the request was to record what was seen. But the exercise pointed out some-

thing amazing. The average person had to perform the exercise three times before doing it correctly. Why? Because one is not accustomed to thinking, even in the simplest of forms, while viewing electronic media.

This paper has described the ills and the negative factors of a monster named television. The obvious question becomes, "What do we do?" As educators, it is our duty to enlighten the mind. Reports reveal that students spend an average of 4,000 fewer hours in the classroom than they do in front of a television. The first task, therefore, is to reduce the time a child spends viewing television. The ideal, of course, would be to eliminate television, but that seems very unrealistic. A two hour selected viewing pattern seems possible. Secondly, parents must be educated about the ill effects of a steady diet of television. Thirdly, consumer education courses for the public must be developed on television viewing. Fourth, and most important, educators need to demand intelligent programing from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the stations themselves. The air waves belong to the public and are to be utilized in the public's best interest. Current programing certainly is not in the public's best interest. It is time for the public in general, and educators in particular, to define "best interest." The FCC insists that air time be given to public affairs programing. These are the shows for the community, but they are

usually aired in the wee small hours of the morning. FCC regulations require that viewer mail received by stations be kept on file for public viewing. In addition, each letter must be given a response, but this is usually a form letter. Most stations also have a community affairs department which is supposed to be in direct contact with the viewing audience. In short, there are ways for the viewer to affect what he views. However, he has to put these mechanisms to use. If educators would organize in their various communities, they could be most effective.

Finally, as educators, we must realize that television in a real sense is our competition. Therefore, the courses we teach and the classrooms we teach in should be so vibrant with information that it boggles the student's mind to the point where the student perceives television as a bore.